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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BELGRADE 000818

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SUBJECT: TFGG01: SERBIAN GOVERNMENT SILENT ON GEORGIA, BUT RADICAL
OPPOSITION SUPPORTS RUSSIA

REF: A) STATE 86173, B) BELGRADE 772, C) BELGRADE 382

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Summary

1. (SBU) The Serbian government has not taken an official position on the Georgia situation (Ref A), hoping to avoid a diplomatic Catch 22 with regard to Kosovo and aggravating either Russia or the West. Government officials, the local press, and Russia's ambassador to Serbia, however, have drawn comparisons between Ossetia and Kosovo, claiming that other similar conflicts will follow. While the government has remained silent, Serbia's Radicals have openly supported Russia. The pressure may mount on the government to make a public statement regarding Georgia, and Russia may call in its favors with Serbia to gain its support. Serbia will try to remain on the sidelines, recognizing that Russian policy has painted it into a box. End Summary.

No Official Position, Despite Perceived Parallels

2. (SBU) Although the Serbian government has not taken an official position on the Georgia conflict, Serbia supports the August 8 European Union statement and the EU's efforts to find a peaceful solution, Serbia's MFA Director for Russia and Euro-Asia Ambassador Vladimir Mirkovic told us on August 13. Mirkovic said although there were "some parallels" between Georgia and Kosovo, he acknowledged that the situations had "different environments and circumstances." (Serbia opposed Kosovo's unilateral declaration independence, seeing it as a violation of both the Serbian Constitution and international law. Serbia continues to claim sovereignty over its former southern province, which is predominantly Albanian and which had been under UN administration since 1999. Russia has continuously supported Serbia's position on Kosovo, particularly within the United Nations Security Council - Ref B.)

3. (SBU) Mirkovic said Serbia has good relations with Georgia, noting particularly that Georgia had not recognized Kosovo's independence. Serbia, he said, supported Georgia's territorial integrity, stating that "there should be no exceptions from international law." Although there is some understanding for the Russian position, "for the moment, Serbia will refrain from any public position," Mirkovic said.

4. (SBU) In a separate conversation on August 13, MFA Americas Desk Director Dragana Filipovic told us that the Russians had tried to call in their chips with the Serbs by asking the latter to rally their "network" to support the Russian position. Filipovic said she thought the MFA had politely declined.

15. (SBU) MOD State Secretary Dusan Spasojevic told us on August 13 that he and others in the government recognized that the Russian aggression and use of Kosovo as "precedent" had painted Serbia into box. Serbia of course respected Georgia's territorial integrity, he said, but was in no position to publicly either support Georgia or condemn Russia. "I hope we can just stay silent," he said. Spasojevic assured us there was no genuine pro-Russian sentiment in Serbia, but that Russian support for Serbia in the UNSC had forced the government to treat Russia as friendly. "But we all know our real history with Russia," he said, "and it has not been friendly." Spasojevic noted Soviet and Warsaw Pact plans to invade Yugoslavia after Tito's death in 1980.

Kosovo Ministry Draws Parallels

16. (SBU) Others in the government have publicly drawn parallels between Georgia and Kosovo. Oliver Ivanovic, State Secretary for the Serbian Ministry of Kosovo, said the situation in South Ossetia was a result of "unprincipled stances on the part of various countries regarding the independence of Kosovo," B92 media reported on August 12. The lesson to be learned from Kosovo, Ivanovic reportedly said, was that "international conflicts cannot be solved by force, violence and violations of international law," adding that he thought there would be additional global consequences. (Ivanovic was traveling in Kosovo and unavailable to meet with us for further clarification of his remarks.)

Opposition Equates Situation with Kosovo

17. (U) Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) official and former State Secretary for Kosovo Dusan Prorokovic (DSS) told local media on August 12 that the situations in Kosovo and Georgia have two common

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points: the attitude of the international community and the role of NATO. Prorokovic said that without Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) and its recognition by some western countries, the problem of South Ossetia could have been resolved by diplomatic means. Pushing the analogy further, Prorokovic said NATO had plans to build a giant military camp on the Black Sea near the Georgian city of Batumi, similar to the NATO military base in Kosovo, Camp Bondsteel. The base preparations started two years ago and NATO would not give up that strategic goal, Prorokovic said.

Russian Ambassador Draws Linkages

18. (SBU) Russia's Ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandr Konuzin, also publicly made the comparison to the situation in Kosovo. On August 12, Konuzin told Serbia's local news agency, Tanjug, that Georgia's "unilateral use of force should be placed in the the same category as other illegal unilateral steps such as the bombardment of Serbia, the invasion of Iraq, or the unilateral proclamation of the independence of Kosovo." Mirkovic confirmed that the Russian Embassy in Serbia informed Serbia on August 8 of its actions in Georgia and "asked for Serbia's understanding."

Radicals Openly Support Russia

19. (SBU) Only the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) has publicly supported Russia's actions in Georgia. The SRS fully supported Russia's efforts to "preserve peace and protect the lives of Russian and other citizens living in South Ossetia," according to their August 8 press release. The statement also said the SRS expected Russia would take back "all territories occupied by Georgian and American troops." The SRS and Serbian nationalist groups marched on August 12 to the Russian embassy in Belgrade to show solidarity with Russia's actions in Georgia. Embassy sources estimated the crowd at only 200.

Media Sees Paradox

¶10. (U) Several independent political analysts have claimed in the media that the conflict in South Ossetia is a direct result of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, which opened a "Pandora's Box" in various troubled regions worldwide. "Washington has long defended Kosovo Albanians' right to an independent state, but in the case of its ally Georgia, it is opposing secession," wrote "Politika's" columnist Bosko Jaksic in an August 12 op-ed. "Principles do not apply to Serbia or Georgia. They apply to the United States and Russia. It is high time we finally understand that the mighty do as they please and the small do as they must. What should Serbia do now? Whatever it say now [about the Georgian conflict], Serbia will do to itself a disservice.... The wise course of action is (for Serbia) to keep out.... Everybody protects their own interests," Jaksic wrote, illustrating the Serbian public perception of the conflict.

Serbia Silent, for Now....

¶9. (SBU) While Serbia is currently silent on the issue, some analysts speculate it may need to publicly back Russia. Serbia may ultimately take Russia's side in the conflict with Georgia, former MFA official and informal G-17 advisor Milan Pajevic told us on August 12. Serbia may feel the need to do so in order to secure (paradoxically) continued Russian support for Kosovo. Pajevic said Russia may also try to condition renegotiation of the terms of a bilateral Serbia-Russia energy deal (Ref C) on Serbia's public support for Russia. As long as Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic is focused solely on Kosovo and Russia's support, Serbia "ultimately will make a connection in favor of Russia," Pajevic said, expressing his disagreement with the Government of Serbia's current hardline Kosovo policy.

Kouchner and Shoygu Cancel Belgrade Visits

¶9. (SBU) Due to the Georgia crisis, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner canceled a planned August 13 trip to Belgrade, according to the French Embassy. Kouchner had planned to discuss Serbia's path to the EU and Serbia's plans to bring the Kosovo issue to the International Court of Justice. Russia's Minister for Emergency Situations Sergey Shoygu also cancelled a Belgrade visit planned for this week in which he intended to discuss the pending bilateral energy deal. The MFA's Mirkovic told us that the meeting would be rescheduled for next week.

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Comment

¶10. (SBU) The situation in Georgia has placed Serbia in a diplomatic pickle. While Serbia asserts its own sovereignty over Kosovo, its Russian benefactor is concurrently supporting the Ossetians' attempt to secede from the democratically-elected government of Georgia. While we recognize Kosovo as a sui generis case, for the Serbian government, the situation in Georgia has awkward similarities which could put it at odds with its UNSC ally Russia. For now, the Serbian government is walking the tightrope by privately supporting EU efforts to find a peaceful solution in Georgia, while remaining quiet publicly. The government hopes that both domestic and international actors will allow it to remain silent. End Comment.

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